

Inquiring into Complexity

A Meditation by Craig Dwyer

My inquiry started with an article written by Keith Sawyer (2004) in which he states that “*scripted instruction is opposed to constructivist, inquiry based, and dialogical teaching methods that emphasize classroom collaboration.*” The article then goes on to paint a very different picture of the top down centralized control method of many reformist teaching practices, to a view of teaching that is more based on *teaching as improvised performance*. This made me think of how we (are supposed to) plan “units of inquiry” at my school, with the six week planner filled out a week before we start with all of our learning engagements and assessments predetermined. This would be closely aligned to what Sawyer would call *scripted teaching*, or I would call *teacher guided inquiry*, with a clear start, middle and end. It doesn’t sit well with me, which is why I don’t do it. I prefer to play trickster.

This thought then turned me to William Doll, and how a curriculum has “*no pre-set beginning, the beginning is the existential moment and as the experience, with communal help, plunges into a situation, a matrix of connections emerge*” (Doll, 2005). How can I plan learning engagements, authentic inquiry, that do not have a pre-set beginning or end, and that allow the learner to improvise as they go? This is surely something that cannot be planned in detail before even introducing the inquiry. That is not my understanding of how emergence works. It is not guided-inquiry that I am interested in.

Searching for a more apt metaphor, I jumped to Jamie McKenzie, and his sense of “*stumbling*”, or “*purposeful wandering*”. The act of getting lost and finding yourself is a disposition and a skill that is worth cultivating, in my opinion. How different would a classroom look if students were knowingly pushed into the unknown, and then asked to orient themselves? What type of thinking and problem solving would emerge? This view of learning would ask the learner to use a completely different skill-set, and would require them to act on the metaphor of *learning as improvisation*. It would require, above all else, not a recall of facts and rules, but rather the ability to ask questions, think critically, and be aware of how one is learning.

Immediately, my mind is transported to Tokyo International School in the fall of 2010, sitting in a workshop with Kath Murdoch on what a *thinking curriculum* might look like. “*The aim of the classroom should shift from learning about things, to learning about learning*”. If I can occasion a classroom that has no pre-set beginning, with a teacher that is improvising, and students who are getting lost and trying to find themselves, *what exactly is going on in that classroom?* The answer, perhaps, is learning about learning. Students are discovering how to learn, and how to use their learning skills to inquire for themselves. So, how is teaching improvised performance? To improvise a performance, we need something to perform. What is the teachers *performance*?

This snapped me back to *Engaging Minds*, and the notion of *teacher as consciousness of the collective* (Davis, 2008). The teacher orients the inquiry. They point it out and bring it into the collective mind. It cannot be about getting to a predetermined space, like a linear planner with six full weeks of engagements planned out in advance. As Davis would say, “*it is more about expanding the space of the possible and creating conditions for the emergence of the as-yet unimagined*” (Davis, 2008). Not scripted (what is), but improvised (what might be). Is our *goal*, for lack of a better word, to orient the learners attention to how they are learning?

If so, how do I put that on my planner?

These thoughts, this network of connections, this emergence of new ideas in my head, gives me a different perspective on education and learning (I don’t like the word teaching anymore). In the company of like-minded individuals, we find comfort in the ambiguity and complex nature of our respective learning environments. Skype with Mike. Comments on my blog. Emails with Lissa. Late night chats with Hiromi. Writing with Edna.

Yet, these also act as isolators. The more I read, the more I realize how alone I am. The more no one else understands what I talk about. The more I get false smiles and dismissive nods of agreement. Blank stares. Uncomfortable shuffling of feet. For the most part, I am left alone. There is a vague feeling of comfort knowing that I am trusted as competent, but that feeling of isolation from a local community is at times overwhelming. The feeling of being mis-understood is uncomfortable.

I don’t know how to end this meditation.

So I will just stop.

References

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